

1-18-69



Joshua Lederberg

Quality of Life and Freedom Will Perish If Unlimited 'Right to Breed' Persists

"POPULATION!" my shrillest critics cry. "Why don't you say more about the world's most critical problem, the population explosion?"

The cold logic of Malthusian arithmetic is of course inescapable. The sheer mass of humanity cannot long increase at its present rate of a doubling every 40 years. There will be an inexorable halt to human increase within, at most, a few generations. We can hardly doubt that the quality of life and the odds of peaceful survival are deteriorating under the impact of that increase long before we reach the biological limit.

As everyone knows, Western science and medicine have contributed to the problem directly, by perfecting our techniques of preserving life and of remedying infertility, and indirectly, by underpinning the humanitarian outlook that cherishes the value of each individual life.

The technology of contra-

ception has of course lagged behind the evident humanitarian need for it. The perfectly safe, reliable, cheap and unobtrusive method has still to be developed. Nevertheless, the obstacles to population control can hardly be labeled as technological gaps. Nor could the ecclesiastical dogmas persist as long as they have without reinforcement from some even more primitive, irrational myths. (In any case, the crisis in Roman Catholic theology must now reach its own resolution regardless of outside comment.)

AS PROF. GARRETT HARDIN, in an article in *Science* magazine, and many before him have pointed out, man's heritage reinforces a will to multiply against a now obsolete set of odds of infant death. He goes on to compare the planet to a common pasture, and reviews the economics of a system where a common good is left to the greediest harvesters.

He suggest that volun-

restraint will be self-eliminating. A system based on social conscience will merely raise the general level of guilty anxiety among the well-intentioned ("Was it morally right for us to have had those twins?") without achieving practically useful results. He would invoke lawful coercion to achieve the ends of the social consensus. In fact, the main aim of his discourse is to attack the unlimited "right to breed" which now stands as a basic personal freedom.

One has to question the merits of such a freedom in a crowded world. Nevertheless, I believe that Prof. Hardin has grossly underestimated the difficulty of actually policing explicit social controls on reproduction without trampling on every other personal freedom.

I would not willingly abandon our cumbersome system of due process that protects the security of my person against arbitrary as-

saults by the fallible agents of the state. We can more readily tolerate the inevitable minor inequities in the allotment of positive incentives and rewards that can achieve the same ends.

THIS MAY seem a feeble answer to the population problem in poor countries, but their basic problem is poverty. Overbreeding is no less a consequence of their poverty than a cause of it, and no amount of gloomy exhortation or diplomatic pressure will get very far unless accompanied by answers to their desperate problems of economic development.

Knowing Prof. Hardin's background as a biologist, I expected him to insist that action be preceded by more detailed knowledge of the motivational causes of overbreeding. In middle-class America, they may be intertwined with our dismal failure to solve the problem epitomized by the title of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex." What other creative role in life do women play after they have dutifully produced exactly two children?

© 1969 The Washington Post Co.

(Joshua Lederberg is Professor of Genetics at Stanford and a nationally syndicated columnist.—Ed.)